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Book Reviews

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Review of *The Cultural Politics of U.S. Immigration: Gender, Race and Media* by Leah Perry (NYU Press)

Liane Tanguay

ABSTRACT Leah Perry's *The Cultural Politics of U.S. Immigration: Gender, Race, and Media* is a timely exposition of how our racialized and gendered immigration paradigms came about as well as what makes them uniquely neoliberal. Perry offers a meticulous account of immigration reform in the 1980s and 90s—including how it negotiated, accommodated and ultimately co-opted the gains of feminism and multiculturalism—while also showing how its discourses were refracted in popular culture and thus within the lived experience of a hegemonic neoliberalism. Perry's analysis that will interest scholars of media, popular culture, and immigration policy alike, and that, in the true spirit of humanistic inquiry, reveals the work of culture in the circuitry of power.

The Cultural Politics of U.S. Immigration: Gender, Race and Media. By Leah Perry. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016, x + 344 pp. (paperback)

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Amid a disturbing resurgence of nativist sentiment and policy, of which the Dreamers' Act is just the latest high-profile casualty, Leah Perry's *The Cultural Politics of U.S.*

Immigration: Gender, Race, and Media is a timely exposition of how our racialized and gendered immigration paradigms came about as well as what makes them uniquely neoliberal. Perry offers a meticulous account of immigration reform in the 1980s and 90s —including how it negotiated, accommodated, and ultimately co-opted the gains of feminism and multiculturalism—while also showing how its discourses were refracted in popular culture and thus within the lived experience of a hegemonic neoliberalism.

Perry's methodology is an ambitious one that combines cultural studies and intersectional feminism, along with critical legal studies, queer theory, critical race and ethnic studies, and media studies (22). Invoking Gramscian "common sense" as it applies to the intersections between culture and the law, Perry links the legislative debates to the circulation of tropes, images, and narratives that helped to inculcate the dominant value system around immigration within mainstream American culture. But these values are not merely a subset of neoliberal "common sense"; Perry claims that the debates and the cultural mediations alike advanced the neoliberal agenda as a whole and "masked and/or rationalized the racist and sexist social relations that structure neoliberalism" writ large (16). Overall, she makes an impressive case for the centrality of the period's immigration discourses to the cohesion of a neoliberal ethos encompassing class, ethnicity, nation, race, and gender.

Each chapter highlights a different aspect of immigration policymaking alongside its popular mediations. In Perry's roughly chronological account, the Mariel Boatlift incident of 1980 brought together the major threads that would continue to inform immigration policy and public perception over the coming decades: the idea of the United States as a

bastion of humanitarianism relative to Communist and other repressive regimes; the “emergency” rhetoric that fed subsequent expressions of nativism, fear, and intolerance; and the ascendancy of the “nation of immigrants” myth that, based on an idealized account of white ethnic immigration, helped to designate “other” non-white immigrants as dangerous, unassimilable, excessively fertile, and/or an intractable burden on the state. It was here that a dialectic was established between the “nation of immigrants” trope and that of the “immigration emergency,” not only in policy debates but also in popular culture, where racialized stereotypes proliferated side-by-side with feel-good, multicultural success stories that positioned America as a beacon of opportunity for anyone with the right grip on their bootstraps.

Gender became especially salient in debates around family reunification—specifically in the context of the “culture wars,” amid a conservative “family values” backlash that sought to reinforce a heteronormative and patriarchal standard aligned with neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency. Debates around welfare were equally gendered, invoking the image of the fecund Latina as a threat to America’s moral and economic well-being while pathologizing single-mother households in a specifically racialized way. To the extent that the welfare cuts coincided with the broader reconfiguration of the welfare state, their racialized and gendered aspects support the connection Perry seeks to establish between immigration reform and the neoliberal project as a whole. And again, this backlash is caught up in contradictory messaging about the United States as a model of women’s liberation and empowerment—a paradigm advanced in popular culture even as legislators set about denying immigrant women precisely what they needed to achieve conservative standards of “respectable” maternity.

The chapter on “cimmigration” ties the law’s production of the “criminal alien” to the regime of increasingly punitive laws enabled by the War on Drugs and the prison-industrial complex, while also exploring popular images of the Latino gang-banger in an overall “climate of fear” (149). But the ostensibly “softer” aspects of immigration policy, such as amnesty, had troubling undersides as well, a tension Perry explores in her chapter on the “Latino/a Explosion” of the 1990s. Discourses on amnesty emphasize the ostensible color-blindness of “nation of immigrants” normativity while at the same time tokenizing racialized and gendered success stories as evidence that anyone can “make it.” Anyone struck by the contradiction between the commodification of racialized and gendered bodies, on the one hand, and their vilification and marginalization on the other, will find this section to be of particular explanatory value.

Ultimately, Perry convincingly shows how Reagan-era conservatives navigated feminist and civil-rights gains while maintaining the case for racist and patriarchal legal and policy frameworks in the realm of immigration and beyond. And it does stand to reason that immigration discourses were central to the cohesion of neoliberal “common sense,” given that so much of the latter rests on what it means to be “American.” Her interdisciplinary approach helps to make sense of the apparent contradiction between the feel-good inclusivity of many popular texts (as well as liberal rhetoric) and the reactionary definition of “deserving” citizenship against which not only immigrants but other “deviant” citizens are subsequently “othered”—which is exactly how neoliberalism separates valuable from “disposable” life in general.

The extent to which immigration discourses *drive* this cohesion is less clear. Capitalism has always organized race and gender to suit its needs—a point not lost on Perry, who sees throughout immigration history the link between race, gender, and capitalism, and for whom, indeed, the tension between nativism and the need for cheap labour is always in play. But some of the stereotypes she invokes did not arise in a vacuum: the violent Latino and hypersexualized Latina, for instance, fit the “common sense” of a culture that has long

seen African-Americans cast in a similar light. Further, some of the cultural analyses, while relevant, can seem superficial, touching only on content as it mirrors, rather than mediates, the tropes deployed by the lawmakers.

But these comparatively minor issues do not undermine Perry's broader contribution to an underexamined chapter in the neoliberalization of law, discourse, and culture—an analysis that will interest scholars of media, popular culture, and immigration policy alike, and that, in the true spirit of humanistic inquiry, reveals the work of culture in the circuitry of power.

 [Bio](#)



Liane Tanguay

Liane Tanguay earned her Ph.D. at the University of Manchester under the supervision of Professor Terry Eagleton. She is the author of *Hijacking History: Representing the War on Terror in American Culture* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012) as well as assorted articles and book chapters, and is currently an Assistant Professor of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Houston-Victoria.



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